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Is your workplace ready for women truck drivers?

The New Zealand trucking industry is facing a shortage of drivers, this isn't a problem that is unique to New Zealand; the global trucking industry has a driver shortage problem. In New Zealand, the average age of a truck driver is 53, which means that as these drivers retire, the shortage is only going to get worse. To fill these positions and ease the driver shortage, groups like the NZ Trucking Association are encouraging businesses to recruit more women into the trucking industry.

Currently only three percent of truck drivers in New Zealand are women, which is significantly lower than the six percent the USA employs, even though the unique geography of New Zealand actually lends itself to making the industry more attractive to women than it is in the USA. The fact that the majority of truck runs in New Zealand take less than a day, having set schedules with predictable home-time gives New Zealand trucking companies the ability to offer women a career in trucking, instead of a living-on-the-road lifestyle which is common in the USA.

One of the biggest barriers to getting women into the trucking industry is the stereotypes around the idea that truck driving is the work of men. One of the unique challenges we have in New Zealand is that

“Currently only three percent of truck drivers in New Zealand are women.”



Kylie Winiata

over 85 percent of the 4500 trucking companies are small businesses with less than five trucks. With smaller trucking companies, it is hard to see trends and easier to rely on old assumptions. In the USA and Australia, multiple large trucking companies have noted that women tend to be safer drivers who take fewer risks and have fewer accidents. They have also noted that their female drivers tend to do a better job with the paperwork and are more customer service-oriented. This has encouraged these large trucking firms to see women as a viable driver choice and they are actively seeking to recruit more women into the industry.

Once trucking companies understand that women can be one of the answers to the driver shortage, there will still be more work to do to attract women into the industry. Kylie Winiata, driving for Foodstuffs, is a

third-generation trucker, but before her father would let her sit for her heavy truck license, he had her sweeping decks and preparing loads. This tendency to ask women to prove they can do the job, when men are assumed to be able to do the job just based on their gender, is itself a barrier to women in the industry. It is important that trucking companies look at their hiring and promotion practices to make sure they are not asking women to jump through extra hoops just to get into and get promoted in the industry.

Once women are on the road and driving, it is important to continue to create an environment where they are safe. One of the common problems women face when on the road is harassment by other drivers. Training the existing industry workforce on diversity and harassment, and then holding drivers accountable for harassment when on the road



and at workplaces will make the industry more hospitable to women. Additionally ensuring workplaces are clean and have facilities that accommodate female truck drivers is also a needed shift in the industry.

Organisations including the Road Transport Forum and the NZ Trucking Association are moving forward with agendas to improve conditions industry wide to attract more women. When small trucking companies get behind and support these initiatives, they are improving conditions. It is hard to see the reward for these efforts right now because these are slow shifts in the infrastructure and attitudes of the industry, but as the aging driver population retires, resulting in even more of a shortage of drivers, these efforts will pay off in the long term.

Another step even the smallest trucking company can take to attract women into

their workforce is to make sure that the equipment is attractive to women. When looking to acquire new equipment, select equipment that includes features such as automatic transmissions, ergonomic cab and seating designs, easy-to-use fifth-wheel locking systems, electronic landing legs, and cab security which tend to be more friendly to not just women drivers but to almost all drivers, allowing for a more diverse workforce. Companies like Ryder in the USA have worked with the Women in Trucking Association and have created vehicle cab specifications that are friendlier to the typically smaller statures of women. Become familiar with these options and include them in your requirements for new equipment.

Finally, work on recruiting female drivers. This means when advertising a position or

recruiting, you have to go outside of the traditional model for hiring new employees. Target women through social media, community notice boards and job search tools that specifically attract women. Network with groups that are friendly to women and put the word out that you are looking for drivers and that you really encourage women to apply and that you offer the equipment, schedules, and support that will make all of your drivers successful.

Making the industry-wide shifts take time and effort, but the driver shortage isn't going to get better any time soon and attracting more women into the industry might be one of the best solutions. The added benefits of a more diverse workforce that includes women might even mean safer drivers, better customer service, and fewer paperwork headaches. ■